

ROBERT MARSDEN CONTRADICTIONS

10 February to 19 March 2011

In 'Contradictions', Robert Marsden explores the way in which form affects perception by incorporating the unexpected into his work. He has created a new series of minimalist metal sculptures, made of solid aluminium and partially faced with patinated brass sheet.

'They contradict each other as pairs', explains Marsden of one particular formation. His pieces work together when set (as intended) in groups of two, three or more, whilst simultaneously working against each other. The pairs are not quite as they seem - they appear to match, yet paradoxically confuse the eye, when on close inspection their similar forms are revealed to differ ever so slightly. Hence the 'contradiction' that is at the heart of these works.

Rather than constructing one whole piece at a time, Marsden's skillfully precise metalwork develops as individual, rectilinear elements. These forms are then brought together in different combinations. Sometimes identical elements are simply turned around to create a slightly discordant appearance; often minor, yet all-important alterations are made that affect their line and volume. His use of patinated brass is functional, as it joins the aluminium pieces together, but it also enhances the purity of form in these works. He emphasises that it is an investigation of form at its most stripped back that is being carried out through his sculptures, explaining: 'it is the shapes that inspire each other'.

Perhaps because of his uncompromisingly minimalist approach to form, Marsden's sculptures are often described as being 'modernist' or 'architectural'. He welcomes these interpretations, although does not intend his work to be representative of architecture. He does not argue with the comparison to architecture of the modern movement, but finds 'modernist' a 'curious, and perhaps inadequate word today...it can mean so many different things to different people'. Marsden's work in the 'Contradictions' series does indeed carry the weight of later, post-war modernism - his densely solid, impenetrable forms could be seen to resemble the Brutalist aesthetic of London's South Bank buildings, for example. But maybe it is this possibility of multiple associations within one theme that leads him to work inside the parameters of this 'modernist architectonic'.¹

Marsden has aligned some of his past work to that of trompe-l'oeil master Rene Magritte, and sculptor Rachel Whiteread, not necessarily in a literal or stylistic sense, but in terms of the concepts and themes reflected on in his work. He likes to 'leave space for the imagination', and encourages close inspection of the work, in order to figure out what is really there. Similarly to Magritte, it is confusion of the eye that he aims for. Like Whiteread, he is interested in absences, voids, and the space between and around objects, often creating works that, although finished, appear to have an element or elements missing. His perusal of ambiguity continues in these new works, and it is left to individual interpretation to decide what 'should' be there.

The skillful, extremely careful precision of Marsden's metalwork leads one to expect an unwavering regimentality in all of his pieces, an assumption which is often upturned. By working in series', especially in forms that are interpreted as architectonic, he simultaneously suggests and subverts the expectation of uniformity in his metal sculptures. The uncertainty that he pursues contrasts with his immaculately considered elemental forms. This combination of the precise and the ambiguous creates a paradox in Robert Marsden's work. These contradictions demand close inspection.

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¹ Mel Gooding, in *Projective Propositions: Robert Marsden's new sculptures*, the exhibition essay from his 2006 solo show at Barrett Marsden Gallery, describes Marsden's work as 'belonging to the specifically modernist type of the sculptural architectonic'.